

HIPC

The Housing Needs of Newcomers in Hamilton

Hamilton Immigration
Partnership Council



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Analyzing the Housing Needs of Newcomers in Hamilton

1. Introduction

Housing is a foundational element in a household's social, health and economic well-being. Housing that is unaffordable or of poor quality creates challenges that could have a negative impact on the wellness of individuals within the household.

Each year, Canada welcomes approximately 250,000 newcomers into the country and housing is a top priority upon arrival. There is a growing pool of research that offers insight on the housing situation of newcomers to Canada (see Newbold et al, 2011; Teixeira et al, 2010)ⁱ.

- While most immigrants have few problems securing housing, a subset – recently arrived refugees in particular – is at greater risk of living in unacceptable housing conditions
- Newcomers also face barriers such as language, insufficient knowledge of the housing system and services, lack of credit history, discrimination, and income that impact their ability to access housing

In Hamilton, where approximately 3,500 newcomers are welcomed annually, the housing situation mirrors national findings as described above; but, there is no comprehensive data source that details the unique housing challenges of Hamilton's newcomers.

The Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council (HIPC) has compiled available data from various social housing providers, service agencies, and community consultations. This report provides a synopsis of the information gathered.

Key Findings in Hamilton

- There are some newcomers to Hamilton who experience the same barriers to safe and affordable housing as referenced above (i.e. language, knowledge of the housing system and services)
- While a number of newcomers seek affordable housing in social housing, most newcomers are housed in private market housing. This may be partly by choice, or partly because of the long waitlist to access social housing
- Of newcomers seeking social housing, a considerable proportion is large families requiring larger housing units. This presents a challenge because the limited availability of spacious units increases their time on the social housing waitlist
- Some newcomers are experiencing homelessness but it tends to be hidden

2. Data Sources & Analysis

2.1 Social Housing

The City of Hamilton's Housing Services Division examined data for households applying for social housing as well as households that are already in social housing. These two sets of data may shed some light on the housing needs of newcomers in Hamilton.

Access to Housing

Access to Housing (ATH) is the central point of access for applying to social housing in Hamilton and administers the coordinated waitlist for social housing. The waitlist database contains information on households applying for social housing and the type of housing units for which they are applying.

Findings:

- Newcomer households make up only a small proportion of the social housing waitlist. 499 applicant households are newcomer status*, representing 8.7% of the total of 5,743 households on the waitlist. Of the newcomer households:
 - More than two-thirds (70%) applied for 3+ bedroom units
 - Nearly one-third of newcomer households applied for 5+ bedroom units

**based on June 2011 Access to Housing data*

Social Housing Tenant File Review

In 2011/2012, the City of Hamilton's Housing Services Division staff reviewed tenant files in social housing to obtain a better understanding of the demographic characteristics. 2,890 files were reviewed, representing almost 30% of tenant households in rent-geared-to-income social housing (not including social housing projects not covered under the Housing Services Act).

Findings:

- The vast majority of tenant files reviewed (80.6%) show Canadian citizenship
- 10.4% indicate permanent resident or landed immigrant status (percentage of newcomers unknown)
- 2.2% indicate refugee/refugee claimant/convention refugee status
- 6.6% of tenant files had missing or unknown citizenship status, i.e. the information was not contained in the file
- Most newcomers are not accessing social housing and are finding housing in the private sector

2.2 Community Agencies

A number of community-based agencies provide housing-related services to newcomers in Hamilton.

Good Shepherd Family Centre

The Good Shepherd Family Centre provides short-term emergency shelter services to families in Hamilton that are experiencing temporary housing loss/homelessness. The Family Centre provides a range of supports to families including housing search support. Family Centre data includes the citizenship status of families and tracks the type of housing the families eventually move into when leaving the shelter.

Findings:

- In 2011, approximately half (47%) of the families using the Family Centre were either refugee claimant or permanent residents:
 - 60 Refugee Claimant families totaling 244 individuals. Of these:
 - 49 moved into market rent housing
 - 9 moved to other accommodation
 - 2 moved into subsidized housing
 - 32 Permanent Resident families totaling 146 individuals. Of these:
 - 28 moved to market rent housing
 - 2 moved to subsidized housing
 - 2 moved to other accommodation.
- Newcomers are highly motivated to get out of shelter and into their own homes
- Advocates (professional or personal contact) play an instrumental role in the process of establishing an address for refugees in particular and newcomers in general

Housing Help Centre

The Housing Help Centre provides a range of housing- related supports including referrals, homelessness prevention and housing retention services, and assistance with housing searches. During the intake process, the Housing Help Centre reports a number of categories of housing status for clients.

Findings:

- From September 2011 to September 2012, 68 clients identified their citizenship status as permanent resident (40) or refugee claimant (28), representing 9% of the total number of Housing Help Centre clients during that period
- Approximately one-third of these clients are experiencing a form of homelessness:

- 19.1% temporary accommodation (hidden homeless/couch surfing)
 - 7.4% emergency shelter
 - 1.5% homeless – on the street
 - 1.5% criminal justice/incarceration
 - 2.9% other
- While two-thirds of clients categorized as living a “regular housing”, this does not mean their housing situation is necessarily adequate, suitable or affordable. Because they are seeking Housing Help Center services, there is likely some issue with their housing that needs to be addressed
 - It should be noted that clients who identify as citizens or as permanent residents may not actually be considered newcomers

Wesley Urban Ministries

Wesley Urban Ministries is a multi-service agency that provides services to government assisted refugees, including the securing of accommodation. These individuals are chosen by the United Nations to be sponsored by Canada and each individual arrives with permanent residency status.

Findings:

- Between May 2011 and March 2012, 317 government-assisted refugees were served by Wesley Urban Ministries. Of these:
 - 298 (94%) were assisted through a housing facilitator to find housing
 - Only 19 (6%) did not require assistance with housing
- A significant barrier to securing housing for these refugees is that many landlords require a co-signor or reference. Many of the Wesley clients do not have this
- Buildings that accept Wesley’s clients without a reference or co-signor tend to have quality standards problems or may not be suitable in terms of the size or needs of the refugee families
- There is a lack of accessible housing for newcomers with disabilities
- Newcomers have little or no knowledge of tenant and landlord rights and responsibilities

St. Joseph Immigrant Women's Centre

St. Joseph Immigrant Women's Centre (IWC) is a multi-service agency that serves refugee and immigrant women in Hamilton. While precise service statistics were not provided for this report, the following information provides estimates:

Findings:

- 95-100% of refugees (privately sponsored or government assisted) require housing assistance, such as information about tenant's and landlord's rights and responsibilities, from a settlement counselor
- 70-80% of family class immigrants require housing assistance from a settlement counselor
- 50-60% of economic immigrants require housing assistance from a settlement counselor
- Newcomers have little or no knowledge of tenant and landlord rights and responsibilities
- There is a lack of accessible housing for newcomers with disabilities
- Affordability is a key concern, with many newcomers paying more than 50% of their income on housing costs, leaving little for the other necessities of life

2.3 Consultations

Housing & Homelessness Action Plan

The Housing & Homelessness Action Plan is a 10-year, solution focused, person-centred plan that will guide how the Hamilton community will address affordable housing and homelessness issues. During the plan's development, the Housing Services Division staff undertook a set of broad community engagement activities, including a focus group with newcomers held at the downtown YMCA on December 20, 2011. Results found:

Findings:

- Generally, newcomers identified housing issues similar to those identified by the broader, non-immigrant population (i.e. affordability, quality issues, navigating the system)
- A key housing need identified was larger units with more space

HIPC Newcomer Consultations

In preparation of Hamilton's first ever comprehensive Immigration Strategy, the HIPC conducted consultations and discussions with over 400 newcomers in 2010, during which a number of housing issues and challenges were identified:

Findings:

- Newcomers are frequently questioned about their credit history and are asked for references and supporting documentation when, as newcomers, they don't have these
- Newcomers report facing discrimination and language barriers when trying to access housing
- Many newcomers have large families and the housing options to accommodate larger families are limited
- The quality of housing that newcomers can access is often poor
- Many newcomers are not fully informed as to their rights in housing and they do not know where they can voice their concerns

3. Conclusions

This report offers a glimpse into data from agencies that serve a number of different populations in Hamilton, including newcomers. In addition to program and service statistics, primary data collection in the form of recent focus group consultations has taken place with newcomers in Hamilton, shedding further light on the housing needs of newcomers.

Based on existing national research undertaken on the housing issues that newcomers to Canada face, many recent immigrants integrate well and settle in adequate and affordable accommodation; however, a sub-group of newcomers, particularly refugees, experience considerable housing challenges. For this group, the first few months of settlement are the most trying and during this period they face very precarious housing situations.

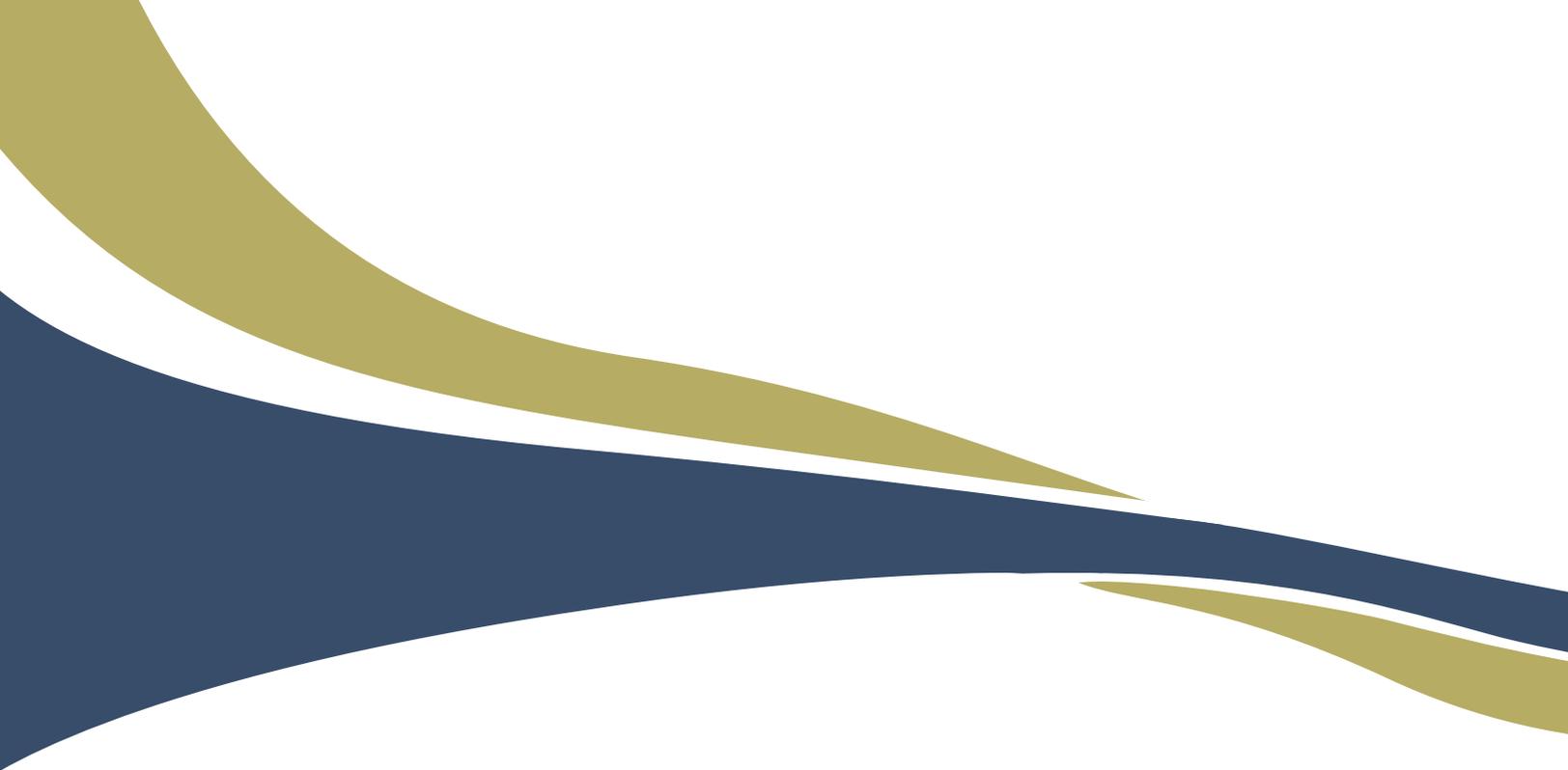
In Hamilton, it is difficult to make the same conclusion that most immigrants integrate well. The data presented in this report suggests that newcomers are not accessing housing services or subsidized housing to the same extent as the rest of the population. It is unknown if these newcomers have successfully found housing on their own or through informal networks of friends and family; or, if they are in fact experiencing challenges and just aren't seeking the help that is available in the community.

The following are possible recommendations for the HIPC and housing partners to work towards creating a more welcoming community where newcomers are able to find safe, secure housing:

- Ensure that all newcomers to Hamilton have access to current information regarding their housing options. Create a basic guide that is available in multiple languages and explains how to start a housing search in the city
- Use various channels (e.g. mainstream and ethnic media, public forums) to communicate to newcomers and housing providers about their rights and responsibilities with respect to information that can/cannot be requested during a housing search, reporting discrimination, etc.
- Increase the knowledge and expertise of service providers about the housing issues of newcomers, via cross-training frontline staff in key service sectors, sharing information produced by HIPC (e.g. fact sheets)
- Ensure that the housing needs of newcomers are incorporated into the Housing and Homelessness Action Plan

ⁱ Newbold B. et al 2011. Exploring the Links: Housing and Homelessness Amongst Newcomers to Hamilton, Ontario

Teixeira C. et al. 2010. Newcomers' Experiences of Housing and Homelessness in Canada. *Canadian Issues*.



The Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council

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